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## ROUSSEAUISM IN TWO EARLY WORKS OF MME DE STAËL

The term Rousseauism is much too comprehensive if used to mean indifferently a *Contrat social* or a *Nouvelle Héloïse*. There are at least two Rousseaus, a rationalist and a sentimentalist.<sup>1</sup> Some restriction in connotation is especially desirable in a discussion of his influence, for only certain aspects of Rousseauism are then generally in question. The term is here employed to denote an emphasis on feeling, imagination, and enthusiasm, the elements that the romantics took from the *Nouvelle Héloïse*.

One might almost say that of the works of her master Mme de Staël remembers only the *Nouvelle Héloïse* and the *Confessions*. Their part among influences that made *Delphine*, *Corinne*, or *De l'Allemagne* is quite large, as any reader could testify; their dominant influence is no less apparent in the authoress' youthful criticism and fiction. Although these first efforts show little beyond an enthusiasm for Rousseau's ideas, still the enthusiasm is significant; there is indeed some development even thus early. An analysis of this initial stage of Rousseauism is what we purpose in this study. The object will be to ascertain what ideas have been assimilated or rejected. The works analyzed are the *Lettres sur les écrits et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau*, which, as Sainte-Beuve remarks,<sup>2</sup> are the first serious work of Mme de Staël, and the *Essai sur les fictions*, which is added to obtain a complete view of her literary ideas when she began writing.<sup>3</sup> The thesis will be that Rousseau leads Mme de Staël to become absorbed in her feelings.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. Schinz, "Rousseau romantique et Rousseau calviniste," *La Revue du mois*, June, 1912; "Rousseau devant l'érudition moderne," *Modern Philology*, December, 1912; "la Notion de vertu dans le premier discours de J.-J. Rousseau," *Mercure de France*, June 1, 1912; *Annales J.-J. Rousseau*, 1911, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> *Portraits de femmes*, Paris, 1880, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> The stories *Mirza*, *Pauline*, and *Adelaïde et Théodore* have been carefully studied by Caro, with reference to Rousseauistic elements, in his *Fin du 18me siècle*, Vol. II, chap. v, "la Jeunesse de Mme de Staël."

- I. The *Lettres sur les écrits et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau. Lettre première. Du style de Rousseau, et de ses premiers discours sur les sciences, l'inégalité des conditions, et le danger des spectacles.*

To plunge at once *in medias res*, Mme de Staël's primary impression of Rousseau shows how well she discerns the nature of his genius: "Il rêvait plutôt qu'il n'existait, et les événements de sa vie se passaient dans sa tête plutôt qu'au-dehors de lui."<sup>1</sup> This apt criticism goes to the root of the matter and grasps the fact that his influence will work toward the restoration of feeling and imagination to literature and art.

The *Discours sur les arts et les sciences* is condemned as being paradoxical; and the dream of bringing man back to Arcadia is chimerical.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless in the effort to find Arcadia, Rousseau discovered some important truths, and "l'âme n'a toute sa force qu'en s'abandonnant."<sup>3</sup> The enthusiasm of a writer interests our critic as much as his rightness of judgment.

The *Discours sur l'inégalité* calls for some similar remarks on the regret for lost Arcadia. The belief in the goodness of nature is mentioned, but not discussed.<sup>4</sup> The authoress is aware that most of Rousseau's sorrows grew out of his inadaptability to the highly socialized life of the eighteenth century. But why, she asks, should he wish to reduce man to a state approaching brutishness? Because his own experience had taught him that unusual gifts of mind and heart may be purchased at the expense of happiness.<sup>5</sup>

The source of Rousseau's fascination over Mme de Staël has been his appealing and expressive eloquence; his sensibility awakens her own: "il agit sur l'âme et remonte à la première source."<sup>6</sup> His merit and charm lie, not in perfection of style, but in soulfulness.<sup>7</sup> Perfection, it is asserted, is a negative excellence; it is the avoidance of faults rather than the creation of beauty, poise rather than abandon. This is to look at perfection through the eyes of the pseudo-classicist. But Mme de Staël prefers soulfulness and *élan*.

The violation of good taste in the use of low words, though offensive, is excused on account of Rousseau's republican sentiments.

<sup>1</sup> All references to Mme de Staël are to the edition entitled, *les Œuvres de Madame la baronne de Staël-Holstein*, 3 vols., Paris, 1858, Lefèvre. This reference is to Vol. I, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> I, 4.

<sup>3</sup> I, 5.

<sup>4</sup> I, 5.

<sup>5</sup> I, 6.

<sup>6</sup> I, 6.

<sup>7</sup> I, 6, 7.

He rebelled at a hierarchy in words. There are abundant examples to prove that he could write with the strictest conformity to good taste when he so wished.<sup>1</sup>

The *Lettre sur les spectacles* is warmly commended. But so zealous a devotee of the drama as Mme de Staël is not interested in the moral question; she is attracted rather to the statements about woman. Rousseau's recognition of woman's sensibility is gratefully noted: "Comme il les adore quand elles se présentent à lui avec les charmes, les faiblesses, les vertus et les torts de leur sexe! . . . Il croit à l'amour; sa grâce est obtenue."<sup>2</sup> Several such phrases indicate how Rousseau's influence channeled a course for the sensibilities of Mme de Staël, and made her an advocate of feeling.

### *Lettre II, d'Héloïse*

In this letter Mme de Staël does not allow herself to write as she would wish. She has undoubtedly felt the appeal of Rousseau's romance of passion, but she dares not confess her liking for such a portrayal of love. Literature permeated with such tense feeling is too delicious to be good. Therefore "j'écirai sur *Héloïse* comme je le ferais, je crois, si le temps avait vieilli mon cœur."<sup>3</sup> So every page of her critique suggests the moral earnestness of the Swiss Protestant. However, "puisque'il faut intéresser l'âme par les sentiments pour fixer l'esprit sur les pensées; puisque'il faut mêler la passion à la vertu pour forcer à les écouter toutes deux, est-ce Rousseau qu'on doit blâmer?"<sup>4</sup>

Though she chooses to affirm that the *Nouvelle Héloïse* exemplifies a great moral idea and contains an incentive to virtue, Mme de Staël has to meet the objection that an interest in Julie is dangerous: "C'est répandre du charme sur le crime."<sup>5</sup> The justice of the criticism is recognized and doubt is expressed whether a psychology is good that disregards the actual moral fall of the heroine: "L'indulgence est la seule vertu qu'il est dangereux de prêcher. . . . Le crime doit exciter à l'indignation."<sup>6</sup> But the ardent Rousseauist is not inclined to linger over the objection. Conceding its validity, she hastens to the defense of the novel. Other novels, such as *Clarissa Harlowe*, may have a more praiseworthy subject, but the

<sup>1</sup> I, 7.

<sup>2</sup> I, 8.

<sup>3</sup> I, 10.

<sup>4</sup> I, 12.

<sup>5</sup> I, 10.

<sup>6</sup> I, 10.

true aim of fiction is in the sentiments inspired rather than in the events narrated.<sup>1</sup> Rousseau creates an enthusiasm for virtue and stirs the heart with his story of a great passion.

But considering the romantic nature of her early tales and the depiction of love in *Delphine* and *Corinne*, one may ask, Does Mme de Staël say how she had really been affected? Was she impressed chiefly with the moral lesson of the *Nouvelle Héloïse*? At the beginning of the letter she makes the statement, "je tâcherai surtout de me défendre d'un enthousiasme qu'on pourrait attribuer à la disposition de mon caractère."<sup>2</sup> So she confines herself to Rousseau's moral ideas on love and interweaves her own. Love brings almost every good: "Quand l'objet de son culte est vertueux, on le devient soi-même . . . involontairement on fait ce qu'il le devoir ordonne: enfin cet abandon de soi-même, ce mépris pour tout ce que la vanité fait rechercher, prépare l'âme à la vertu: lorsque l'amour sera éteint, elle y régnera seule."<sup>3</sup> This recalls Rousseau's enthusiasm for virtue and his cult of the beautiful soul.

The strictures in the *Nouvelle Héloïse* on cynical Paris and on corrupting literature have been read with a kindly eye: "Le tableau d'une passion violente est sans doute dangereux, mais l'indifférence et la légèreté avec laquelle d'autres auteurs ont traité les principes supposent bien plus de corruption de mœurs et y contribuent davantage."<sup>4</sup> Mme de Staël has begun to think about those ideas on society that will partly be the basis of her criticism.

The social experience of Mme de Staël prompts a criticism of the pleasantries of Claire: "Il faut, pour atteindre à la perfection de ce genre, avoir acquis à Paris cette espèce d'instinct qui rejette, sans s'en rendre même raison, tout ce que l'examen le plus fin condamnerait."<sup>5</sup> The idea is that the melancholy and solitary man should write only such literature as expresses himself. Mme de Staël makes thus early the distinction between a literature that reflects the *esprit de société* and one that reflects the individual. Wit is "peu digne d'admiration" compared with Rousseau's ability to "communiquer les plus violents mouvements de l'âme."<sup>6</sup>

This letter contains also a hint of the division of literature into antique and chivalrous.<sup>7</sup> Mme de Staël remarks that the ideas of inevitable fate and divine wrath lessen the interest of *Phèdre*; the

<sup>1</sup> I, 11.<sup>2</sup> I, 10.<sup>3</sup> I, 12.<sup>4</sup> I, 13.<sup>5</sup> I, 18.<sup>6</sup> I, 19.<sup>7</sup> I, 19.

interest of our romances lies in the depiction of chivalrous conduct. Rousseau is given a separate classification, for he first painted the "sentiment qui naît du libre penchant du cœur, le sentiment à la fois ardent et tendre, délicat et passionné."<sup>1</sup>

Nothing is said about nature except that towering rocks, great lakes, and rapid torrents accord admirably with passion.<sup>2</sup>

### *Lettre III, d'Emile*

The estimate of Rousseau's romance of education is that of all sensible people: "C'est ainsi qu'on doit élever l'homme; c'est l'éducation de l'espèce plutôt que celle de l'individu. Mais il faut l'étudier comme ces modèles de proportion que les sculpteurs ont toujours devant les yeux, quelque soient les statues qu'ils veulent faire."<sup>3</sup> The value of the plan is that it conserves for the child the imprint of nature and gives him to society with his inborn characteristics developed; an enlightened and orderly society ought to be composed of such individuals. But from time to time society drifts away from this ideal built upon nature; an *Emile* then becomes needful.<sup>4</sup>

Mme de Staël never wavers in her belief that our natural self is our best self, and therefore heartily indorses the idea that education should be a natural awakening of the inner goodly man.<sup>5</sup> She is not sure that the long delay of formal study is advisable;<sup>6</sup> yet she entertains no doubt that the pupil can master the program proposed.<sup>7</sup>

An attractive feature of this scheme of education is the avoidance of deceit and tyranny. It is a phase of the Rousseauistic concern for the individual.<sup>8</sup> Mme de Staël objects to any infringement on the right of the individual: "Comme j'aime . . . cette éducation . . . qui le force à l'obéissance non en le faisant plier sous la volonté d'un gouverneur ou d'un père dont il ne connaîtrait pas les droits et dont il haïrait l'empire. . . ."<sup>9</sup> This championship of the individual will be of the first importance in her future criticism, fiction, and political writings.

Scant attention is given to the argument that the child must be kept ignorant of vice till maturity. Mme de Staël is content to

<sup>1</sup> I, 19.

<sup>3</sup> I, 24.

<sup>5</sup> I, 21, 22.

<sup>7</sup> I, 21.

<sup>9</sup> I, 21.

<sup>2</sup> I, 19.

<sup>4</sup> I, 20, 21.

<sup>6</sup> I, 21.

<sup>8</sup> I, 21.

say a few commonplaces. Another idea without much attraction for her is physical education.<sup>1</sup> Yet how much more important this is than the troubled romance of Emile and Sophie!

The passage on motherhood shows a warm sympathy with Rousseau's ideas: "Il fit connaître . . . ce bonheur . . . il interdit les serviles respects des valets . . . mais il permit les tendres soins d'une mère."<sup>2</sup> *Bonheur* is what Mme de Staël is grateful for. *Bonheur* and *sensible* are from the first the words she uses oftenest.

The poetry that Rousseau wove about childhood has little appeal for the authoress. Her own childhood had been that of a precocious girl whose delight was to talk to the witty encyclopedists of her mother's salon, or to read novels destitute of interest to most children. She could hardly respond to the impassioned recollections of Rousseau. She writes merely: "Il a su rendre à cet âge son bonheur naturel . . . cet âge où l'imagination ne craint rien de l'avenir, où le moment présent compose toute la vie, où le cœur aime sans inquiétude."<sup>3</sup> This sounds more like a sentence in a textbook of psychology than romancing. However profound the influence of Rousseau, he could not endow Mme de Staël with his own richly poetic temperament. He could deepen, not broaden, her personality.

The ardent admirer of the *Nouvelle Héloïse* naturally devotes considerable space to the education of Sophie and to her relations with Emile. The neglect of Sophie is a disappointment; her character is left undeveloped and even represented as essentially weak. Women ought rather to be encouraged to the superior virtues she is capable of; her affections should determine her attitude toward her husband.<sup>4</sup> The part Sophie plays in *Emile* is most regrettable: "Pourquoi flétrir le cœur par la triste fin de l'histoire d'Emile et de Sophie?"<sup>5</sup> How can the creator of Julie have imagined Sophie as the typical woman? Had he not above all others taught the ideal of happiness in love? The explanation offered is that "il a condamné lui-même l'éducation qu'elle avait reçue; il l'a sacrifiée au désir de faire valoir celle d'Emile, en donnant le spectacle de son courage dans la plus violente situation du cœur."<sup>6</sup> Mme de Staël fails to recognize that Rousseau's view of woman was epicurean.

<sup>1</sup> I, 23.<sup>2</sup> I, 24.<sup>3</sup> I, 24.<sup>4</sup> I, 26.<sup>5</sup> I, 26.<sup>6</sup> I, 26.

Relative to the manner in which *Emile* had influenced her, Mme de Staël informs us it was through her feelings: "C'est par les sentiments de son âme que Rousseau captive l'intérêt."<sup>1</sup> And again: "Comment ne pas adorer son amour pour la vertu, sa passion pour la nature? Il ne l'a pas peinte comme Virgile, mais il l'a gravée dans le cœur."<sup>2</sup> Now Mme de Staël's ideas on virtue were vague, and she had as yet no feeling for nature; eloquence straight from the heart is what moves her: "Elle fait naître dans l'âme ces mouvements qui décident instantanément du parti que l'on prend."<sup>3</sup>

In discussing the profession of faith by the Savoyard vicar Mme de Staël willingly accepts the belief in a kindly Providence. Rousseau is praised for consulting man's natural instinct and for respecting "les pieuses pensées dont nous avons tant de besoin."<sup>4</sup> But the curious reader will remark a lack of interest, certainly of enthusiasm, for this part of the *Emile*. Mme de Staël subscribes to the creed and agrees that religion springs from human needs; that is all. When the theme is the love of Julie she adopts quite a different tone. Till the death of Necker, her father, Mme de Staël gave only a nominal adherence to Christianity; she was never a religiously minded person.

#### *Lettre IV, Sur les ouvrages politiques de Rousseau*

Though Mme de Staël preferred a scheme of government based on the English constitution rather than on the political theories of Rousseau, this letter shows the power and variety of his influence. She follows Montesquieu with respect to the origin and working of political institutions, but sometimes sees truth in the abstract doctrines of Rousseau. She realizes that there was never a social contract in history, still the idea of a contract resides in society as a moral force.<sup>5</sup> Montesquieu is on the whole responsible for her ideas, Rousseau for her enthusiasm: "Ce n'était pas assez d'avoir démontré les droits des hommes, il fallait, et c'était surtout là le talent de Rousseau, il fallait, dans tous ses ouvrages, leur faire sentir le prix qu'ils doivent y attacher."<sup>6</sup> As for the ideas of Rousseau, Mme de Staël says there are arguments in the *Contrat social* so logical that they are irrefutable.

<sup>1</sup> I, 27.

<sup>2</sup> I, 28.

<sup>3</sup> I, 28.

<sup>4</sup> I, 29.

<sup>5</sup> I, 31.

<sup>6</sup> I, 32.



The principle of equality is accepted for an ideal: Je l'aime aussi, de toute la force et de toute la vivacité de mes premiers sentiments, cette liberté qui ne met entre les hommes d'autre distinction que celles marquées par la nature."<sup>1</sup> After full reflection she has made the principle her political faith.<sup>2</sup> However, Montesquieu is more useful for men considering a society already formed.<sup>3</sup>

*Lettre V, Sur le goût de Rousseau pour la musique et la botanique*

Mme de Staël seemingly did not care much for music; her interest in Julie or the sensibility of Rousseau fills many a page, but music can claim only a paragraph. This is really surprising, for it is upon her emotional nature that Rousseau has greatest influence. But art was a closed door to her.

Like Rousseau she desires in music an appeal to the heart; she speaks of certain airs "simples et sensibles . . . qui s'allient si bien avec la situation de l'âme."<sup>4</sup> One likes to sing them when one is unhappy on account of their melancholy.<sup>5</sup> Indeed the charm of music is its invitation to a dreamy melancholy.

Relative to his penchant for botany Mme de Staël says that Rousseau disliked to consider plants with reference to their utility; such an idea spoiled the pleasure he found in the science. He wished to exclude from nature anything that recalled the ills or necessities of man.<sup>6</sup> The incident of the periwinkle is mentioned: "Comme elle lui retraçait tout ce qu'il avait éprouvé jadis."<sup>7</sup>

*Lettre VI, Sur le caractère de Rousseau*

This letter is an apology for Rousseau. Mme de Staël defends her master with feeling and is not often willing to make concessions to his critics. From the defense one may judge how fully she has accepted his gospel of feeling.

First of all, are the *Confessions* trustworthy? Proof of sincerity may be found in those passages that do not redound to the credit of the writer: "On cache plutôt qu'on n'invente les aveux que les *Confessions* contiennent. Les événements qui y sont racontés paraissent vrais dans tous leurs détails. Il y a des circonstances que

<sup>1</sup> I, 33.

<sup>2</sup> I, 31.

<sup>3</sup> I, 34.

<sup>4</sup> I, 36.

<sup>5</sup> I, 33.

<sup>6</sup> I, 34.

<sup>7</sup> I, 36.

l'imagination ne saurait créer."<sup>1</sup> But Mme de Staël does not seek out objectionable passages to assure impartiality of judgment; she is writing a brief for a client.

The analysis deals with temperament rather than with character. Morality is discussed, but in a manner far different from that of a critic like Vinet. Vinet examines carefully and presents a clear and suggestive statement of genius tainted with moral disease. For Mme de Staël a cool diagnosis is apathy. Should not a character be studied for inspiration and enthusiasm? Should not ugly traits be passed over? Not much is said therefore about the spineless morality of Rousseau, still less about his criminal actions.

The contrast between the inner and the outer man is noted. Rousseau was common in appearance, but his life within was rich.<sup>2</sup> As to personality, *sauvagerie* was a dominant trait.<sup>3</sup> His extreme shyness is not called a defect: "Il était né pour la société de la nature, et non pour celle d'institution. . . . Il ne lui fut possible ni de la comprendre ni de la supporter."<sup>4</sup> These are the kindly words of the genial hostess of Coppet, adept and tactful in the management of persons so antipathetic as Benjamin Constant, Sismondi, and Schlegel. Broad sympathy generally determined her attitude toward others. In the case of Rousseau the idea of a diseased personality is hardly present. His experiences increased his shyness, that is the sum and substance of the matter for Mme de Staël: "Rappelez-vous combien dans sa jeunesse il aimait les hommes! S'il a plus changé qu'un autre, c'est qu'il s'attendait moins aux tristes lumières qu'il fut forcé d'acquérir."<sup>5</sup> There is no hint that the Elysian years spent with Mme de Warens unfitted him for understanding his equals and profiting from their company.

The inclination to reverie and melancholy is mentioned: "Il était né contemplatif, et la rêverie faisait son bonheur suprême; son esprit et son cœur tour à tour s'emparaient de lui. Il vivait dans son imagination; le monde passait doucement devant ses yeux: la religion, les hommes, l'amour, la politique l'occupaient successivement."<sup>6</sup> Rousseau *rêveur* will become Mme de Staël's idea of genius; genius will dream and thus be frankly self: "Celui que le transport de son imagination et de son âme élève au-dessus de lui-même . . .

<sup>1</sup> I, 37.

<sup>2</sup> I, 37.

<sup>3</sup> I, 39.

<sup>4</sup> I, 39.

<sup>5</sup> I, 43.

<sup>6</sup> I, 39.

celui que son élan emporte et qui sent un moment ce qu'il n'aura peut-être pas la force de sentir toujours, est-ce que c'est cet homme-là qu'on peut croire hypocrite?"<sup>1</sup> *Elan* is then a primary quality of genius. The idea recurs often; a still better wording is: "Cette exaltation est le délire du génie."<sup>2</sup>

Another trait chosen for discussion is the love of solitude. Mme de Staël finds in solitude a source of happiness rather than a means of communion with nature. The necessity of a life spent apart from society is to become one of the articles of her literary creed. Of course fertile reverie and solitude go together.<sup>3</sup>

Rousseau's many pages about nature have not been read with deeply aesthetic or emotional satisfaction. Mme de Staël has been too absorbed in his imaginative depiction of character, in his melancholy, sensibility, and social troubles to dwell on his love of nature. The lack of response to this passion of Rousseau is quite evident from the following typical passage: "Un jour ils [he and a friend] se promenaient ensemble sur les montagnes de la Suisse; ils arrivèrent enfin dans un séjour enchanteur; un espace immense se découvrait à leurs yeux; ils respiraient à cette hauteur cet air pur de la nature auquel le souffle des hommes ne s'est pas encore mêlé. Le compagnon de Rousseau espérait alors que l'influence de ce lieu animerait son génie . . . mais Rousseau se mit tout à coup à jouer sur l'herbe . . . heureux d'être libre de ses sentiments et de ses pensées."<sup>4</sup> What word is there about nature? Are we told anything more than that Rousseau was happy? When the theme is nature Mme de Staël generally drifts into something about man.<sup>5</sup> She understands only the consolation that nature offers a troubled heart. All that can be affirmed for the present—she was twenty-two when she composed these letters—is that Rousseau has made her aware that there is a world of nature.

The term imagination is used with reference to reverie rather than visualization. This Rousseauistic trait seems to have struck Mme de Staël almost more than any other: "Je crois que l'imagination était la première de ses facultés, et qu'elle absorbait même toutes

<sup>1</sup> I, 40. The statement is in connection with the charge of hypocrisy, but is none the less applicable here.

<sup>2</sup> I, 40.

<sup>3</sup> I, 44, 45.

<sup>4</sup> I, 41.

<sup>5</sup> I, 42, "Comme son séjour aux Charmettes," etc.

les autres."<sup>1</sup> This turning of the eyes inward attracts Mme de Staël, but she is not blind to its evil possibilities: "L'imagination était en démente; il avait une grande puissance de raison . . . sur les objets qui n'ont de réalité que dans la pensée, et une extravagance absolue sur tout ce qui tient à la connaissance du monde."<sup>2</sup> One might ask whether, if he did not understand life and could not view it objectively, we should accept his teaching. Mme de Staël does not look for a depicter of cold reality in Rousseau; she seeks an enthusiast and a champion of virtue.<sup>3</sup> Read Rousseau, she advises, and you will have the right feelings about life.

Rousseau the lover is given his due share of discussion. There is no attempt to make of him a romantic lover: "C'était à l'amour qu'il songeait; ses sentiments ne le tourmentaient pas; il n'étudiait pas dans les regards de sa maîtresse le degré de passion qu'il lui inspirait; c'était une personne à aimer qu'il lui fallait."<sup>4</sup> The letter on the *Nouvelle Héloïse* informs us to what extent Rousseau's ideas of passion are accepted; here we see that the man is not regarded as an exponent of his teaching. The point to note is that Mme de Staël is sympathetic in her judgment. That Rousseau loved only in his imagination calls forth no satire. A follower of Voltaire would have laughed.

With respect to the moral conduct of Rousseau the verdict is that he was good. The bad aspects of his character are explained as "actes de folie," "absences de tête."<sup>5</sup> Because his sentiments are so noble, because his work breathes the spirit of truth, one owes him an explanation: "Les hommes se jugent eux-mêmes par leurs intentions plutôt que par leurs actions, et il n'y a que ce moyen de connaître un cœur susceptible d'erreur et de folie."<sup>6</sup> To the explanation that he abandoned his children from fear of future evil for them, Mme de Staël adds for further extenuation, "ce même homme eût été cependant capable de donner les plus grands exemples d'amour paternel."<sup>7</sup> Like Rousseau, she forgets that true virtue does not leave the will untouched; she is willing to overlook much, much indeed, if the plaintiff is *sensible*.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I, 38.    <sup>2</sup> I, 39.    <sup>3</sup> I, 48.    <sup>4</sup> I, 43.    <sup>5</sup> I, 42.    <sup>6</sup> I, 41.    <sup>7</sup> I, 38.

<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Mme de Staël remarks against Rousseau: "On ne peut pas cependant dire que Rousseau était vertueux, parce qu'il faut des actions et de là suite dans les actions pour mériter cet éloge," I, 39.

Warm sympathy is expressed for Rousseau's morbid suspicion of his associates and his conviction that he was persecuted. He was not understood; his friends should have taken pains to make known their kindly feelings.<sup>1</sup> That he might have been unreasonable or blamable does not occur to the authoress.

She accepts the theory that Rousseau committed suicide, her argument being that he could no longer endure to live unloved; weary of his loneliness and troubles he ends them. The theory is not based on facts or evidence, but on an idea of inner necessity.<sup>2</sup>

In conclusion one may say that the principal Rousseauistic element of these letters is sensibility. The very frequent use of the word tells how the temperament of Mme de Staël has been influenced; sensibility pervades her thought; it is the bond of kinship between herself and her master. The result is a deepening and increase in feeling. An emphasis on feeling leads to the idea that genius must be *élan*, that it must express its individual reaction, that it must seek solitude and give free rein to reverie. An emphasis on feeling leads to approval of passion as portrayed in the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, and to a certain tendency to overlook immorality. An emphasis on feeling means also the acceptance of the Rousseauistic conception of virtue, viz., sentiment and enthusiasm about virtue instead of an exercise of the will.

Mme de Staël is inclined to adopt Rousseau's strictures on the *esprit de société*. She has decided that great and profound literature receives dubious benefit from this spirit. In matters of taste and literary expression she has grown suspicious of artful polish and tradition when compared with freshness and personality.

The influence of Rousseau has not yet brought her to appreciate what she did not have a temperamental liking for. Hence she has no passion for music, though she is *sensible*; she cares little for poetry, and less for nature.

## II. The *Essai sur les Fictions*

Three main points stand out in this essay: first, the imagination, which creates a new world to console us for the loss of happiness in

<sup>1</sup> I, 39.

<sup>2</sup> I, 47.

this; secondly, the heart, which must be the theme of literature; thirdly, the avoidance of all that is artificial and untrue to life. The essay shows definitely how Mme de Staël is developing Rousseau's ideas. She is a daughter of the materialistic and intellectual eighteenth century, and cannot appreciate poetry, yet Rousseauistic sensibility has made her realize the desirability of imagination: "Il n'est point de faculté plus précieuse à l'homme que son imagination."<sup>1</sup> Two reasons are assigned, one derivable from Rousseau and driven home by the tragical experience of the Revolution: "Ce n'est qu'à l'aide de quelques créations, de quelques images du choix heureux de nos souvenirs, qu'on peut rassembler des plaisirs épars sur la terre et lutter;"<sup>2</sup> the other idea is that "le petit nombre des vérités nécessaires et évidentes ne suffira jamais à l'esprit ni au cœur de l'homme."<sup>3</sup> This also smacks of Rousseau; no encyclopedist could ever have spoken of the *small* number of necessary truths. The two ideas together mean simply that the imagination must furnish an escape from the pains and sorrows of life. Possible objection is dismissed with the statement that only the mediocre or the over-rational would demur—the pseudo-classicists.<sup>4</sup> Men desire above all else to have their interest stirred: in literature the way to interest is through a *talent d'émouvoir*.<sup>5</sup> When Mme de Staël speaks of the imagination she really means the emotions excited by a portrayal of life. This present estimate of the imagination as comprehending every faculty of man except his reason will not be the usual point of view of the authoress.

She speaks at length against the imaginative aspects of the epics of Greece and Rome, the romances of chivalry, and the historical novel (as also later in *La Littérature*). These types of fiction do not offer proper models for imitation: "J'ai voulu . . . prouver que les romans qui prendraient la vie telle qu'elle est, avec finesse, éloquence, profondeur et moralité seraient les plus utiles de tous les genres de fictions."<sup>6</sup> She means that novels like *Clarissa Harlowe* or the *Nouvelle Héloïse* can alone satisfy the present generation (of the time of Mme de Staël). No objection can be raised to this criticism, but the authoress proceeds to pass judgment on the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, the *Orlando furioso*, the *Faerie Queene*, as if they had been

<sup>1</sup> I, 127.

<sup>2</sup> I, 127.

<sup>3</sup> I, 127.

<sup>4</sup> I, 127.

<sup>5</sup> I, 127.

129.

written for her generation. She is too much interested in her feelings to fancy types of fiction that do not satisfy her tastes and emotional needs. What she dislikes she condemns. The gods of Homer and Vergil, for instance, are vexing in serious fiction and serve only to spoil the analysis of the characters; it is a mistake to center the interest in these divine personages instead of in the characters. In the romances of chivalry the marvelous adventures of the knights and ladies may be diverting, but this mingling of the marvelous and the real is to the detriment of psychology. In a word, Mme de Staël does not as yet practice relativity in criticism. She is, however, aware that a historical sense is necessary for the appreciation of these creations of bygone times: "Cependant, il faut dans le jugement des choses humaines exclure toutes les idées absolues; je suis donc bien loin de ne pas admirer le génie créateur de ces fictions poétiques sur lesquelles l'esprit vit depuis si longtemps, et qui ont servi à tant de comparaisons heureuses et brillantes. Mais on peut désirer que le talent à naître suive une autre route."<sup>1</sup>

Rousseau is largely responsible for this condemnation of the marvelous and allegorical. In the *Nouvelle Héloïse* Mme de Staël had learned how a writer may be imaginative, poetical, and *sensible* and yet keep strictly within the bounds of nature. She had seen how Rousseau turns our eyes upon the inner man and yet invests this inner man with a glamor that enchants. This vesture of passion, this elaborate analysis of the heart, prejudiced Mme de Staël against other forms of fiction than the *Nouvelle Héloïse*.<sup>2</sup> It accorded so well with her feeling and thought that it became her model for the exposition of the heart. She seeks a *Nouvelle Héloïse* in whatever she reads. This accounts for the inability to appreciate Homer, Vergil, Ariosto, and Spenser. Anything that detracts from the engrossing study of the heart is objectionable: "J'aime qu'en s'adressant à l'homme on tire tous les grands effets du caractère de l'homme."<sup>3</sup>

Complete illusion is what the Rousseauist desires in literature. This may be seen in Rousseau's criticism of classical French drama:

<sup>1</sup> I, 131.

<sup>2</sup> The influence of Richardson and Fielding need hardly be separated from that of Rousseau. See Texte, *J.-J. Rousseau et les origines du cosmopolitisme littéraire*, livre II, chapitre lii.

<sup>3</sup> I, 131.

"Le Français ne cherche point sur la scène le naturel et l'illusion, et n'y veut que de l'esprit et des pensées; il fait cas de l'agrément et de l'imitation, et ne se soucie pas d'être séduit, pourvu qu'on l'amuse."<sup>1</sup> Illusion in literature is a part of the gospel of nature. If we emphasize the natural in man as contrasted with the acquired and artificial, we seek in literature the same impressions and sensations that life itself gives. We desire illusion in order that our hearts may be moved. The best means of attaining this fascinating quality is to depict the heart alone: "C'est là qu'est la source inépuisable dont le talent doit faire sortir les émotions profondes ou terribles."<sup>2</sup> Let the novelist refrain from describing strange experiences; let him keep his plot within the humanly possible; let him avoid palpably false allegory.

A thoroughly Rousseauistic note occurs in the passage on the predominant place given to love by the novelists: "Il n'y a point d'enthousiasme dans l'amitié, de dévouement au malheur, de culte envers ses parents, de passion pour ses enfants dans les cœurs qui n'ont pas connu ou pardonné l'amour."<sup>3</sup> The affections and passions interest Mme de Staël above all else; they are about all she sees in humanity. Any school of literature makes the passions its principal study; the distinction of the romanticist is that he is obsessed by them.

The Rousseauistic argument used in justification of the *Nouvelle Héloïse* is repeated: "La moralité des romans tient plutôt au développement des mouvements intérieurs de l'âme qu'aux événements qu'on raconte."<sup>4</sup> History is therefore inferior to the novel as a depiction of man; memoirs also: "Le don d'émouvoir est la grande puissance des fictions; on peut rendre sensibles presque toutes les vérités morales en les mettant en action."<sup>5</sup>

In conclusion, again we find that an emphasis on sensibility is what Mme de Staël has taken from Rousseau. He has led her to value the imagination (as she understands the word, viz., reverie and a depiction of life that will move the heart profoundly), because it is necessary if the writer is to give us the feeling we crave. He has led

<sup>1</sup> *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, ed. of Garnier, p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> I, 131.

<sup>3</sup> I, 140.

<sup>4</sup> I, 141.

<sup>5</sup> I, 143.



her to insist on a portrayal of the inner life alone, of the heart, in order that literature may offer us the same impressions and sensations that life does.

Such is the somewhat undeveloped Rousseauism of Mme de Staël when she began writing. It is an emphasis on temperamental inclinations rather than a ripened criticism. A continuation of this study would show how in her mature and original work Mme de Staël gradually thought out to definite literary and philosophical tenets those ideas of Rousseau to which she was so strongly attracted; it would show also how Rousseauism guided and controlled her opinions and literary *procédés*.

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